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ABSTRACT

Story telling is defined as a kind of journalistic documentation, based on directly observable referents, and used to contribute to an understanding of educational problems. In the area of educational research, story telling is part of the genre which includes case studies, ethnography, and ethnology. Story telling describes an environment in order to communicate a general understanding of a situation. Fieldwork is the essential ingredient in story telling. In educational research, fieldwork consists of familiarizing oneself with local institutions and organizations; talking to local officials and citizens; and particularly, communicating with school personnel and working in the school. The keys to successful fieldwork are the ability to listen; the mastery of interviewing techniques; acute observation skills; and facility at synthesizing information. Story telling, as an ethnographic approach, shows what is happening but does not necessarily reveal causes, and may not be the proper evaluation method if the purpose of the study is to prescribe change or to determine policy decisions. (MH)

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Story Telling and Educational Understanding*

by

Terry Denny

November 1978

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Story Telling and Educational Understanding*

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November 1978

*Based on a talk given at the International Reading Association's Annual Meeting, May 1978, in Houston, Texas.

"Come then, let us pass a leisure
hour in story telling" Plato's Republic, Book II

Practitioners like the sound of it; researchers sneer at the mention of it; decision makers disregard findings based on it; several scholarly fields claim they invented it; and like topsy it grows and grows. The case study in education is growing in popularity.

Hiding behind the everyday-use of the label "case study" I find a bewildering variety of approaches to our examination of educational phenomena. To my reckoning no one could possibly know what I was going to say if this paper were titled "Ethnographic and Case Study Research." To keep my head straight I reserve certain words for specialized meanings--case study and ethnography are two such labels. I write stories, not case studies, although readers of my stories may mistakenly call them ethnographic research or case studies. Were I doing ethnography or ethnology, which I never do, I would have a much heavier burden. I would have to address questions of validity; of theory contribution, of completeness, of generality, of replicability.

In this paper I first place story telling in context within the broad range of effort associated with case study methods. Then I shall discuss aspects of fieldwork which underlie story telling, first moves, key questions, tricks, listening, looking and synthesis. I conclude with evaluative criteria for story telling and a few comparative comments about story telling and traditional research methods utilized in education.

I find Wolcott's distinctions (1976) helpful to sort out these labels in a sensible manner. He begins with ethnology, moves next to ethnography and finally to the case study. To these I would add a fourth: a kind of journalistic documentation, which I call story telling.

For Wolcott and for me ethnology refers to a theoretical statement about relationships and meanings within a group or among a number of societies. Ethnography refers to the basic descriptive work on which ethnology is based. Further, an ethnography is a complete account of some culture-sharing group. Case studies are intensive and complete examinations of a facet, an issue, or perhaps the events of a geographic setting over time. And finally, a story documents a given milieu in an attempt to communicate the general spirit of things. The story need not test theory; need not be complete; and it need not be robust in either time or depth. In preparation for my remarks on story telling I shall turn to the case study and ethnography. Before so doing I must acknowledge that there is a point beyond ethnology in the minds of some. Fenton (1970) has described this ethereal space as ethnoscience, or "an explicit meta-theory of ethnographic theories" (p. 542). I do not have the slightest idea what that is about. I suspect it has very little to do with anything that can be learned directly with hypothesis testing as we know it; or with story telling as I do it. Most ethnographic theory has never been proven or disproven because it has not been tested. And theory doesn't get tested because it is a lot easier to "talk" ethnography than it is to do field work. But I profess....

The Case Study and Ethnography

First, what do ethnography and the case study share in common? (Keep in mind the distinction that the ethnography is a comprehensive study while the case usually examines but one important dimension of the site.) The story is the first cut at understanding enough to see if a case study is worth doing. More about that later.

They both represent attempts to reveal "what is going on" in a given

setting. In education the setting is most often the classroom. It need not be: for example, an observer who knows the junior and senior high school milieu might trade off visiting the classroom for the locker-room, or the toilet, or the hall to understand certain dynamics of the school.

Second, some case studies and all ethnographies, as I use these words, must go beyond depicting "what is going on." A narration of the highest quality is not good enough. Excellent descriptive accounts of educational settings may or may not be ethnography. Fred Erickson (1973) has said that ethnography is not a reporting process: "It is an inquiry process guided by a point of view based on the setting being studied and a knowledge of prior anthropological research" (p. 10). Ethnographic description is framed by a conceptual system believed by the writer to represent the reasons behind the way things are.

Third, ethnography and case studies allow readers "elbow room" to draw conclusions other than those presented directly by the writer. Further, I think it noteworthy that a case study's conclusions may be less important than the communication of a sense of wholeness, of what I like to call the "it", the "topic", the "problem", the case. While ethnographies may fall short of presenting the <u>whole</u> of it, so does the Encyclopedia Britannica and the Oxford English Dictionary. But case studies do give the reader the feeling of a unity, of coverage, of an integrity of <u>wholeness</u>: whatever their length. A case study need not be of book length to be good. We do not need to know everything in order to understand something.

It helps me to distinguish the product-noun forms of words associated with this approach from their process-verb forms. This gets a little tricky. For example,

a) one can produce an ethnology and one can do ethnology;

b) one can write an ethnography and one can do ethnography or ethnographic research;

c) one can publish a case study and one can conduct a case study; and

d) one can write a story and one can search for one.

Although I try to separate the noun and verb forms of the words "case study" and "ethnography", I do not bother with ethnology or story telling because there aren't enough ethnological studies in education worth mentioning, and story-telling doesn't suffer from the same linguistic potential for confusion.

A library has case studies and ethnographies: the products. People also conduct case studies and ethnography--the processes. I think it important to listen and to read to determine if the speaker or writer is talking about the way or process or the result or product when these words are used. Why do I belabor the distinction? Our criteria should be less severe for an ethnographic approach than for an ethnographic product. For example, when a teacher tries to figure out what has gone wrong with the "blue bird reading group"; that's one thing. If the teacher claims to have produced an ethnography of the blue birds that's quite another. For the case study, (noun and the verb forms), my standards are lower than for an ethnography. In a similar manner however, I demand more of a case study report (product) than I do of taking a case study approach (process) to an educational question.

An ethnographic approach to studying education is not the only game in town. There are others. One learns different things from the case study or the story-well-told than one learns from quasi-experimental research; or from a questionnaire survey, or ethnology, or from evaluation based on an adversarial model. It is not a matter of differential power of these approaches as much as it is matching them to the tasks. Different strokes for different games. My game is the fieldwork behind story telling products.

"Good ethnography will survive the theoretic frame of the man who wrote it" (Kutsche, p. 957). Anthropologist Paul Kutsche said that (1971). My phrasing has it that weak theory comes and goes but superb description survives the test of time. I guess there is a fine line between good journalism and good ethnography--too fine for me to draw--but I'll take good journalistic writing over poor ethnography anytime. Story telling is an attempt to employ ancient conceptualizations characterized by little imagination and focused on directly observable referents. We now have Newtonians in educational research -- no Einsteins -- carrying on 4th-place decimal ethnography before getting the rudimentary realities in place. This much I propose for general agreement: without good documentation, good story telling, we'll never get good educational theory, which we desperately need.

Simply put, if you know what the problem is you don't need a story teller or an ethnographer. An educational researcher might be able to help discover the probable effects of competing treatments or solutions to a problem. It is not likely, but it is possible. I claim story telling can contribute to our understanding of problems in education and teachers can help. Folks are forever calling for and proposing nifty solutions to problems never understood. Story telling is unlikely to help in the creation or evaluation of educational remedies, but can facilitate problem definition. Problem definition compared to problem solution is an underdeveloped field in education.

Fieldwork

I like doing fieldwork more than I do reflecting upon it. Rosalie Wax (1971), my anthropological patron saint, has asked the fieldworker to report how he himself has been changed by the fieldwork experience. Few accept her challenge. I am speaking in the spirit of her challenge here. Successful fieldwork includes

a lot of crazy little things that I learned the hard way; such as giving precise cleaning instructions to motel and boarding house service people, and getting the motel manager's permission to tape notes, maps, on the wall. I promise swift and permanent injury to anyone who disturbs my bedspread's 3 x 5 card matrices. And I've learned that an evening meeting with that key informant doesn't leave time to write up the field notes of the day much less the information gleaned that night. It has taken a decade to learn to resist the seductivity of letting the tape recorder do all the documenting for me. "It's all on the tape...I can retrieve it later." It's the "laters" that inundate one in the field.

And there is the constant battle with the privacy, intrusiveness, shame, and personal integrity issues that await you with each fresh informant. Some one should put these matters together in a field manual or handbook for the naive case study enthusiast. Other topical candidates for such a manual are protecting the autonomy of the fieldworker; tactics for gaining entry; quick checks on promising leads; antidotes for going native; issues surrounding informant autonomy; multi-instrumentation techniques as validity enhancement; maintaining rapport; obtrusiveness of recording methods; using and over-using key informants; and problems associated with neutrality; objectivity and intimacy; combating loneliness or aloneness: all vital issues untouched in this paper.

Here's a Few Secrets About First Moves in the Field

Hit the library early on site: get into the local letters to the editor; go to the board of education and check out the last three years of board minutes (they'll think you're nuts); contact trade union halls; see if a retired principal or superintendent or "Ms. Teacher" is in town and go talk to them; visit schools in adjacent districts; get the chamber of commerce's view of the schools; and consider using Gordon Hoke's brilliant triangulation technique of "...visiting

at least three neighborhood bars to get the bartenders' views of the same setting" (Hoke, 1970).

Attend the DAR, NOW and League of Women Voters meetings. Sample the K of C, Elks, Lions, Rotary, Moose and American Legion fare. Check on Democratic, Republican and Independent party education committee platform statements. Find out who serve as education editors for the local newspapers, radio and television stations. Then begin a series of Dutch-treat luncheons which will get you started toward information and indigestion.

First moves on site tend to be my important ones. My fieldwork attitudes elevate first-moves too high perhaps, but there's no faulting their importance. The temptation is very high to try to say the right things to everyone when you start fieldwork at a site. Promises are one trap that the fieldworker must avoid. My personal rule is to avoid promising anything I cannot...or can... deliver. Tell people openly what you are trying to do and enlist their aid. Promises about products, or processes by fieldworkers can become prescriptions in the minds of listeners and prescriptions are guaranteed to be fatal. It surprises me to this day how far just plain, dull, truth can carry one in the field: "I am working to get some sense of what it is to teach and learn here in River Acres" (Denny, 1977, 1978). It worked every time.

Reasonable expectation setting is essential for oneself and others when doing fieldwork. For example, I never share my optimistic time schedules for completion with anyone. I take the most pessimistic one I can imagine and then add 50%. A two months' study that could possibly stretch to four months <u>means</u> five months to me. That way I almost always finish "on time" and rarely run more than just a little bit over.

More about those critical first moves. When working in the school, I say get out of the administrator's office as soon as possible. Set up shop in the open if at all possible. Write up your notes in the teachers' lounge;

anywhere visible, public. Take out your notes in the hall, parking lot, lunchroom. People will ask what you're doing. Give them sensible, truthful answers. Get your presence around fast. If you tape record, get a shoulder strap for your case and wear it everywhere. In a word, give your informants a chance to check you out; provide many chances before you begin checking them out. It is possible to be so concerned with your task of checking out the field that you fail to make yourself sufficiently accessible for testing by the field.

I have a personal list of four key questions which I use in doing a field study. I carry them in my wallet, hang them on the motel mirror, rehearse them frequently when I get stuck. I believe these are generic questions which should be asked before, during and after fieldwork.

1. What am I doing?
2. Am I talking with the right person?
3. Is this the right time and place?
4. Will it all be worth it?

Note these were anticipatory in mode. When I have concluded my listening and reviewing, my fieldwork, I try them again.

1. Was the problem a decent one?
2. Were the instrumentation & bias control o.k.?
3. Have I captured the limitations & facilitations of the setting?
4. What came of it?

After I have written a story I rehearse them again to determine if it is worth sharing with others.

The Methodological Question

I heard that Clyde Kluckhohn once said the methodological question in fieldwork was, "What Navajo would tell his life story to a white man?" Boy, have I lived that question over-and-over! I can tell you I felt it as a Northerner in Texas, as an adult observer in a teenage institute, as a honky at a Southern all-black-college homecoming game, as an external evaluator assigned to a celebrated early-childhood education curriculum group. So I feel compelled to note with great detail where, when, under what conditions my informants say what they do. I also record my feelings in the margins when I think I'm being hyped, lied to. By the way, that's the easy part. It is when I am jiving, lying and engaging in self-deceit that fieldwork gets really difficult.

It is also truly frightening to discover you are not the right person doing the fieldwork. Even if one is the right person, hiring an aide can be fatal for data collection. A four-person team engaged in story telling is almost always three too many. Fieldwork done by others invariably has to be redone. There are the Kluckhohns to be sure, but I could fill a page with names of educational and psychological teams that afford us with living evidence of Charles Brauner's sage observation that "One plus one is already a lie; two only compounds it" (Brauner, unpublished novel). If you cannot get the job done in the field, the addition of another worker will most surely not help. Quit.

Tricks

Gymnasts refer to exceedingly difficult, quick inserts for their performance routines as "tricks." The successful execution of these tricks is often the difference between winning and losing in competition. I shall describe a few tricks in my fieldwork routine which prove to be vital. While they do not sum

to fieldwork they can enhance the quality of your data if mastered.

The first trick you might insert into your routine is what I shall arbitrarily term the "unrelated help" move. I try to stay alert for opportunities to help people when I am on site, especially some voluntary work not related directly to instruction. For example, I have baby sat, replaced an automotive distributer cap, repaired a fishing reel, shared newspaper and magazine clippings, carried supply boxes, installed an overhead projector bulb, done chi-squared analyses, substitute bowled, assisted at Mass, edited a term paper, given PTA talks and made bread for the Demolay. I do these sorts of things on the premise that good guys get better data. No sense leaving your humanness at home. I will do most anything not directly related to instruction to help folks when I am in the field: I like it; they like it; and you might, too.

A second trick is the IJ. Robert Wolf of Indiana University taught me the value of the IJ notebook. He stole the idea from Nixonophobes Woodward and Bernstein, who in turn merely popularized a hallmark of investigatory journalism--hence, IJ. I refer to a handsized notebook; often 3 x 5 in size with a spiral binding. Frankly, I'd now be crippled without one in the field. The notebook goes right in front of my informant. What I write is immediately seen by the person talking. In fact, I find it instructive to stop the person from time to time and review what I have been writing. It enhances credibility, checks on the accuracy of what has been written and obliges you to stay on the ball. The IJ is pocketable, informal, tidy, cheap, accessible and most importantly it forces me to listen. The tape recorder lulls me into a dependency relationship. I relax too much. Further, the IJ is one heck of a listener's guide to one's tapes in one's motel room the weekend after an interview. It is not a useful trick for every fieldworker however. Roughly every fourth or fifth student who tries the IJ masters it. Others rely on 3 x 5 cards, three-ring notebooks, tape recorders and the like.

Listening

The next topic is a bag full of tricks--the act of interviewing. You probably know there are dozens of books out on interviewing theory and technique. Most are devoted to fact finding, or are designed with coded responses and numbercrunching and have not helped me. Indeed, I would trade several such books for a half-hour discussion of a videotape recording of an interview conducted by me or one of my students insofar as skill acquisition and modification are concerned. Interviewing afterall is no more than talking and listening. Therein lies the rub. Most of us are not very skillful conversationalists and it follows that to rely on one's natural style to carry an interview often results in the same inept conversational techniques now being called upon for interviewing. I think interviewing is the near fatal flaw of many a field study. Myopia runs a close second and I'll touch on that a little later. I have not yet seen the sort of interviewing guide or manual we need for fieldwork in education. It will take more than the mere listing of tricks I am sure. One way to start is to cite people who could write such a manual or could serve as key informants for a ghost writer. My model field interviewer is Bill Moyers. His early work for his PBS "Journal" reveals for all the ways of a quality interviewer. The man <u>does</u> listen, and his informants obviously want to tell him their stories. Moyer's retelling always illuminates without discreditable prying or spurious spontaneity.

Dick Cavett goes beyond listening and is without rival for interviewing the intelligentsia of literature and the arts. I believe his verbal dexterity could be too heavy for fieldwork interviewing and doubt he would be effective in many school settings. Johnny Carson's plastic grin, jiving style, and clear gift for repartee might be more workable on occasion, but the data would be about as important as bubble gum.

The "just-plain-folks" style of Studs Terkle is worthy of careful investigation. Perhaps he is better seen as a writer using a tape recorder. Clearly a literate man, he nonetheless suppresses his persona during his interviews and lets his tape recorder run while bringing out his interviewees' tales of triumph and travail.

Gordon Hoke interviews while giving the appearance of talking all the time. It is a unique art form worthy of study. In machine-gun tempo he shares theory, gossip, facts, unrelated tidbits from here and there with whomever he interviews and obliges the informant to struggle to get his or her two cents worth in. He spends more time reading--anything--anywhere than do most fieldworkers. Fascinating. He leaves them wondering in much the same fashion as did the Lone Ranger. When Hoke leaves, many a superintendent has found himself saying, "I don't know why I tell that man the things I do."

What I am calling for is a serious analysis of a key instrument in fieldwork, the interview. I admit to dodging the real issue, the story-teller-as-instrument. However, I believe we could start with studying highly successful examples. There are so few that the project seems manageable in my mind. There are doubtless dozens and dozens of tricks that could be shared and learned through such an analysis. Even I have a few more--but I think I've made my point. I'll leave the topic of interviewing by sharing five characteristics of every good interviewer I know. Unfortunately these are not insertable tricks. If I am correct in seeing these as necessary--I know they are desirable--they could serve as selection criteria for interviewers worth training. I also recognize a touch of tautology in what follows and leave it to you to carry it further or drop it. First, there are no good interviewers who are not exceedingly bright. Second, there are no good interviewers who are not interesting people in their own right. Third, here comes the circularity, there are no good interviewers who do not love

interviewing. Fourth, good interviewers are able to work for long stretches of time without fatigue; and finally every good interviewer I know has a clear sense of self. I am sensitive to the fact that there are no female interviewers on my list. Commercial television's front runner Barbara Walters does not favorably impress me with her interviewing skills: her talent lies elsewhere, surely. Although we have no televized evidence on hand I think it safe to assume Margaret Mead must be a superb field interviewer.

Looking

I know there must be tricks for looking as there are for listening. Looking with the pure intent of seeing, truly seeing what is going on is what is called systematic ethnographic ethological observation. In educational research there are nundreds of observational systems. There may be gold left to be mined in the mountains of published observation schedules with which I am familiar. Each time I look there are new ones. Educational researchers do not seem to want to--to be able to--learn from one another. The old observational systems are never faulted because they are rarely tried more than a few times. The new ones serve the one study, the one dissertation, the one master; and that is that.

Each new writer seems to say, "Look at education my way; a fresh new look!" Educational optometrists are not in short supply. I claim most educational researchers do not look <u>at</u> education; most develop observational instruments to enable us to look <u>for</u> things determined to be important by the field of educational psychology. The legacy of pre-ordained observations is an impoverished one. It is hard to get very excited about what observational instruments have enabled us to see. Observable behavior regularized for anlaysis or prediction can interest me when the predictable actions are contradicted by verbal behavior. But that sort of contrast is all too rarely discussed by educational researchers.

I said there must be tricks to looking. Beyond the shibboleths of getting good sleep, keeping a sharp eye moving around to change perspective and looking for a way to make sense out of your data, I have no advice. I do have foreshadowings on how, not where, we might acquire a trick or two. First, Georgia O'Keefe painted flowers so huge that I finally saw them. Diane Arbus took pictures so that I could see beyond gross physical anomaly. A colleague of mine, Klaus Witz, has taught a 16 week course based on total visual analysis of a few minutes of videotape of a teacher. Society Mike sketches fugitives for the Detroit Police by changing others' words into a picture of someone he has never seen. Merely suggestive ramblings but the dross rate in those hills will be no worse than in the coded interactions of Ned Flanders' fields.

Looking at something rather than looking for something: a major difference. Fred Wilkin (1974) of National College and Mike Atkin (1973) of the University of Illinois have called for a new style of inquiry to attempt to set the educational research scene on its feet. In the early seventies he claimed educational research needed a new breed of conceptualizers; "Scholars who approach the problems of practice rather than the problems of the disciplines when they attempt to understand educational events" (Atkin, 1973, p. 4). Atkin analogized the new searcher to the ethologist, who studies animal behavior. I do not know if my notions about story telling are what they had in mind. I do sense a kinship with their discomforture with traditional educational psychology approaches to educational practice.

Another field note is best represented in a personal experience. I once visited a 6th grade teacher in a classroom at least one full day a week for one whole school year to find out how a traditional "old-fashioned" teacher got such good student achievement and I didn't learn one thing. I gave up. Not because nothing was there--I just could not get it. I think Harry Wolcott (1972)

explained that experience in his superb article Feedback influences on field-work, or, a funny thing happened on the way to the beer garden. Wolcott says he never does learn much about the people he intends to study. That's the point I want to make: I did not shake my original set. I sense a deeper issue lies in this matter which I cannot understand.

Synthesis

Still another issue is buried in a haunting phrase: "data, data everywhere." Pseudo-ethnographers lace their conversations with precious prattlings about the lush rewards that await the fieldworker: Oh, the richness of the data; the fullness of the observations; the contextual blends that emerge from naturalistic study; the inherent messages that spring forth from the documentations; the "ah-has" and "o-hos." That's not what happens to me. It's a job. I love it; but it is often dull stuff and I regularly reach a point in my work where I contemplate fleeing to Guadalajara under the assumed name of Nick Barf. I find my mantra at matins a recurring one: "How am I going to use all this stuff? How in the hell am I going to use all this!?" I couldn't complete a study without one of three things: a motorcycle and a fishing rod are two of them. Genuine involvement in the setting is necessary--but getting away from it is an aperiodic imperative for me. Fieldwork gets tiring! I no longer even lie about it. Good teachers get tired, too. So I get away for a day. I get some of my best writing done on a motorcycle. I should pay largemouth bass $50 an hour for their advice.

When I return to my data I find the "good little people" have been at work and parts of it now appear to hang together; it fits better than it had before. Sometimes what happens to me is the emergence of a low-level approximation of a tabular form for summarizing information which I have gathered on dimensional perspectives (Becker, 1961). It may be a ratio of volunteered natural language information to that directly gathered; or it could be a triangulation of three

separate informants' data; whatever. But usually it is a persistent set of "one liners" that haunt me because they are all true; and they just don't fit. That's agony. However, I have come to know it is my first real step toward progress in fieldwork. A robust paradox is a guarantee that I'm getting somewhere. I know I can make it then; I can get the story. There may be enough to share with others. And, because I never deal much with scientific theory or with hypothesis testing, or with the analysis of culture, I know my fieldwork is nearly done.

Good Story Telling

Few people, and I am no exception, will ever do ethnology, an ethnography or a case study in the terms I have defined them. I have taken an ethnographic approach to two educational settings and a case study to seven others. I have not written a case study--much less an ethnography--as I use the terms. Case study and story telling both require a lot of time and energy. But ethnography requires more talent than does story telling as does squash when compared to racquetball; or throwing a decent clay cylinder on a wheel compared to hand-building a coil pot; or playing a Bach fugue on a church organ versus pushing the rhumba button on a Lowrey Track-3 rhythm system. Each paired example could be viewed as comparable in the commonsense use of the words, case study, ceramics, and playing the organ. But the difference in skill requirements clearly separate the artist from the run-of-the-mill performer in each paired instance.

I am opting for a heavy investment in lower-skill-requirement approaches to searches in education. Literacy in one's mother tongue; reasonable sensitivity to one's informants and environment, and a clear attempt to communicate the important dimensions of an observed milieu are what I ask of a story teller. Good ones do more. Superb ones approach ethnography--but I'll settle for more modest expectations.

The case study approach has achieved considerable acclaim to date and I have high hopes for its continued future. We should adopt an attitude similar to the one Webb, et al (1966) did for unobtrusive measures when viewed against standard measurement research procedures: the case study approach cannot substitute for a questionnaire study. One approach can supplement but not substitute for each other. The questions and their answers will both be different. Neither is better.

What is a good case study? Well, when the reader finishes the case or the ethnography, and can say, "Yes, I know it; I could go to that hall, that class, that lunchroom and know pretty much what to expect; I'd know how to behave in that place," then the ethnographer or case study writer has done a good job. A good story would provide the reader with some of that feeling for parts of the setting.

Case studies I have seen that I awarded high marks are the recent film "Saturday Night Fever;" and 60 Minutes' treatment of the meaning of a house in a mobile society. Studs Terkle's book, Working (1975); Charles Brauner's (1974) essay, "The First Probe," and Howard Becker's (1961) classic ethnography Boys in White serve as other exemplars. I mention both filmed and printed media as examples in the hope that some "strict constructionist" will tell me that an ethnography or case study has to be written. My reply will be "says who?" Not Robert Stake (1978), for example. In an AERA audiotape entitled "Seeking Sweet Water," he suggests that a written case study doesn't have to be worded. He says a college's annual research-office report which details the student body, the faculty, budget, and endowment data--though seldom called such--is a case study. It enables the reader to draw reasoned conclusions about a given setting. So does "Saturday Night Fever." The institutional research report is probably a poor basis for scientific generalization to America's colleges--but

it could have a lot of validity for a given college. There are writers whose stories again and again meet the criterion of veridicality or at least verisimiltude. When I finish their work I feel as though I were there. --or I could be there. Studs Terkle, William Faulkner, J. D. Salinger, Robert Pirsig, Loren Eisley, and Paul Goodman are a few. They silver Kluckhohn's mirror for man.

An ethnographic approach such as story telling is necessarily high in costs: time, energy, mistakes, and wages. Its benefits are high as well: it reveals the texture of a setting, the natural language of those living there, and the relationships of the system as no other approach can. The story rarely reveals <u>why</u> things operate as they do and almost never results in a trustworthy statement of what one ought do to change the situation. Which leads me to say I think I know why research in general doesn't make much of a difference, and why ethnographic research, case studies and story telling aren't going to affect instruction, learning, schools or education. Studiers aren't supposed to change things. The changers do that: those with a vision unblinded by the way things are. They already know the awful truth about current practice. And the decision makers don't want change, they want stability. So that's two huge groups who don't want, won't use, case studies. Jo Day (1978) pointed out to me that ethnographic accounts do not point the way to policy decisions or give clues as to what should be done differently. I concur. Doug Sjogren (1978) reminds me this fault is shared by evaluative research methods in general.

<u>The Relative Utility of a Case Study Approach to Studying Educational Settings</u>

While I am in sympathy with the proposition that an educational setting can be <u>understood</u> better if one takes an ethnographic approach to documenting

that setting, I do not know this methodology to be better than another for solving educational problems in that setting.

I am trying to say several things here. First, ethnographic approaches can yield good portrayals of what's happening. Second, ethnographic approaches fall short of revealing what is causing what: a trait shared by most educational research tactics with which I have firsthand familiarity. And third, it is a perfectly miserable methodology to employ if a central purpose is to prescribe change in the setting under study. A personal anecdote: a school administrator from my recent Texas study (Denny, 1977, 1978) flattered me when he called me after my study to say "It was a damn good 'article' for a Yankee." Later in the conversation he castigated me for not telling (him) what to do about problems I had described. What had I done?

Well, my story revealed the dynamics of how teachers used science, math and social studies as preparation: preparation for more science, math and social studies, for college, for jobs in the workaday world, for living, for whatever. The story included observations and lengthy quotations of teachers who damned the preparation ethic for kids who weren't headed anywhere tomorrow; for students who were trying to figure out what yesterday meant; for faculty who were discontent with the old ways and unenthusiastic about the future.

They had trouble there in River Acres, Texas and it began with a B--not with a T. B for belief, or G, for growth, or U for unrest. And what to do about it? That's what that administrator wanted to know. That was not my purpose for doing the study--but it was his for reading it. What did my story point to as remediation, as prescription, as a sensible way to go? Not a damn thing...and every damn thing. There were as many solutions as interviewees.

There are other weaknesses in the story. The National Science Foundation study of science education K-12 in the U.S.A. sent me to Texas with targets identified for me before I got in the field. In retrospect I think I blew some of the story: Houston football, sex, Tex-Mex, immigrants, and a parent secession movement never earned their rightfully-prominent place in my story. I suspect it was the prepotency of predetermined NSF targets of science, mathematics and social studies instruction and learning.

My fellow writers on that study--(a few were ethnographers; a couple were case study writers; a couple were story tellers and one, quite-likely a misplaced plumber)--differed from me in their attitudes toward proper roles for analysis and writing recommendations from such studies. One veteran writer assured me that my level of analysis (read that abstraction) would increase considerably were I to have spent more time in the Texan setting. I didn't believe it when he said it. I don't believe it now. What would have resulted, I believe, is a finer grain picture: more detail, more exquisitely grabby language, more contradictions, more convolutions, and considerably more evidence that the complexities of life in River Acres, Texas would require years to understand. Years.

I am regularly faulted for providing too much descriptive talk and not enough analysis. Talk versus analysis; I have struggled with that before. Seeing may be believing, but I need more. I never see the picture worth a thousand words. It occurs to me that a very few words can represent a thousand pictures; can represent unobservable feelings; can reveal tomorrow's hopes and yesterday's fears which shape today's actions. My Texas story is largely teachers' words. Students, parents, administrators and others with something to say about River Acres contributed to its telling. But it's mostly a story of and by teachers. It wasn't supposed to turn out that way. The deeper I

went, the more I needed a place to park my mind to keep it out of trouble. I found it in the teachers' words.

If you think I have been harsh on anthropological approaches to understanding educational problems you're mistaken. I would like to declare open season on the cheap-shot artists in educational research: those with their numerical designs of nothingness; others who feature the half-day-quicky site visit "study;" measurers who assess individuals--and then talk about groups; still others with their ask-em-everything-and-throw-it-on-a-computer questionnaire surveys; and particularly those with their grand control groups that couldn't control for the instructional time devoted to attending to first graders' bladders much less to the experimental variables operating in a school's reading curriculum, let's say. If the contributions of educational psychology and evaluative research to our understanding of teaching and learning could be translated into human stature it would stand a little over four feet high.

And a plague on the majority of the evaluation world as well! I see increasingly an educational community gone mad with counting, accounting, accrediting, performing, certificating, and competencying. The world will be a better place when educational evaluators can find a job. The dross-rate is now so high it simply isn't worth attempting to read the dreary palaver we call research and evaluation literature if one is concerned about either understanding what goes on in schooling; or if one has to make a decision among several alternative instructional strategies in a real-life setting. I rely increasingly on <u>listening</u> to experts.

Listening to so-called experts at conferences can be a little bit better than reading their polemics. Most educational speakers cannot fool us quite as regularly, easily and generally as can most educational writers. We can watch how she or he says it; we can decode the signals embedded in intonation, stress

and juncture; and we can ask the acid question! These are lost opportunities (costs) in the research and evaluation reports generally found in our scholarly journals.

I'll close by reminding you that the ethnographic approach is a slow one. It will never substitute for "quick and dirty" research studies. The field worker is forced to work around other people's schedules. Case studies and story telling are slow and painful work. Ethnographic approaches are hard on the people doing them. We must find ways to help teachers tell their stories. I believe the story telling I have discussed is legitimate albeit low-level. It enables teachers to tell a meaningful story without being "scientifically rigorous."

If you can work at night after working all day; if you can stand open challenges to your competence; and if you like it, the ethnographic approach is a good way to understand education a bit better. No impatient researchers, or physical wrecks, or compulsively tidy minds need apply. But for those with the journalist's sense of a story, the approach, if not the product, is almost always addictive. Most of us in American education lose at everything else we try in the name of research and evaluation, why not consider another approach?

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